

What is Spyware?

Spyware is a general term used for software that performs certain behaviors, such as advertising, collecting personal information, or changing the configuration of a computer, generally without appropriately obtaining consent.

A computer might be hosting spyware, or other unwanted software, if:

- Advertisements pop-up even when the computer is not connected to the Web.
- The browser's default home page or search settings have changed without the user's knowledge.
- A new, unwanted toolbar appears in the browser that is difficult to remove.
- A computer takes longer than expected to complete some tasks.
- There is a sudden rise in computer crashes.



Division of Information Technology Services

6000 State Office Building
Salt Lake City, Utah 84114
Phone: 801-538-3833
FAX: 538-3622
<http://its.utah.gov>

ITS Computer Security Office

<http://security.utah.gov>

ITS Customer Support

801-538-3440 or 800-678-3440
<http://its.utah.gov/services/support/helpdesk.htm>



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Spyware and Other Unwanted Software

Spyware is often associated with software that displays advertisements (called adware) or that tracks personal or sensitive information. In most instances this may be undesirable, but it does not mean that all software that provides ads or tracks on-line activity is bad.

For example, you might sign up for a free music service, but “pay” for that service by agreeing to receive targeted ads. You might also agree to let the company track your on-line activities to determine which ads pop up. If you read and understand the terms and agree to them, receiving free music for the occasional inconvenience of dealing with a few adds may be a fair trade-off.

Another type of unwanted software, also known as spyware, makes changes to a computer that can be simply annoying or may cause the computer to slow down or crash. These programs have the ability to change a Web browser’s home or search page, or add additional, unwanted components to a browser. These programs also make it difficult to return settings to their original state.

**The key is
whether or not the user
understands and agrees
to what the software will do
once it is installed.**

How Does Spyware Get There?

There are a number of ways spyware or other unwanted software can get on a computer system. One common trick is to covertly install the software during the installation of wanted software, such as a music or video file sharing program. Whenever a program is installed on a computer, the user should carefully read all disclosures, including the license agreement and privacy statement. Often the inclusion of unwanted software in a given software installation is documented, but appears at the end of a license agreement or privacy statement.

Signs of Spyware

If a computer starts to behave strangely or displays any of the following symptoms, it may be hosting spyware or other unwanted software.

- **Pop-up advertisements appear all the time.**

Some unwanted software bombards a system with pop-up ads that aren’t related to a particular visited Web site. These ads are often for adult or other potentially objectionable Web sites. If pop-up ads appear as soon as a computer is turned on, or even when the user is not browsing the Web, this may indicate the presence of spyware or other unwanted software.

- **Settings change and can’t be changed back.**

Some unwanted software has the ability to change the home page or search page settings. This means that the page that opens first when the Internet is accessed, or the page that appears when Search is selected, may not be what the user expects. Even if the user knows how to adjust these settings, they may find that they revert back to the unwanted settings every time the computer is started.

- **The browser contains unwanted components.**

Spyware and other unwanted software can add additional toolbars to a Web browser. Even if the user knows how to adjust these settings, they may find that they revert back to the unwanted settings every time the computer is started.

- **The computer seems sluggish.**

Spyware and other unwanted software are not necessarily designed to be efficient. The resources these programs use to track a user’s activities and deliver advertisements can slow down a computer. In addition, errors in the software can make a computer crash. If there is a sudden increase in the number of times a certain program crashes, or if a computer is slower than normal while performing routine tasks, this may indicate the presence of spyware or other unwanted software.

Removing Spyware

Many kinds of unwanted software, including spyware, are designed to be difficult to remove. If a user tries to uninstall this software like any other program, they might find that the program reappears as soon as the computer is restarted.

There are tools available to remove difficult spyware. Several companies offer free or low-cost software that checks a computer for spyware and other unwanted software and helps to remove it.

Some Internet Service Providers (ISPs) include anti-spyware software in their service packages. Check with them to see if they can recommend or provide a tool.

If an ISP doesn’t offer a spyware removal tool, ask people you trust to recommend one, or see the list below for a few well-known tools.

Caution: Keep in mind that removing unwanted software with these tools may also remove the “free” program that introduced it to your system, and you may no longer be able to use it.

Spyware Removal Tools

Some of the most popular spyware removal tools are:

Giant AntiSpyware (now owned by Microsoft)

<http://www.microsoft.com/athome/security/spyware/software/default.aspx>

Webroot Spy Sweeper

<http://www.webroot.com/>

Ad-Aware SE Personal by Lavasoft

<http://www.lavasoftusa.com/software/adaware/>

eTrust Pest Patrol by Computer Associates

<http://www.ca.com/products/pestpatrol/>

Spybot Search and Destroy

<http://www.safer-networking.org/en/index.html>